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ABSTRACT

A persistent dilemma of school leadership is whether principals should concentrate efforts on building cohesion and good working relationships among staff or on specific curriculum aimed toward specific learning outcomes for students. Interviews with three principals who worked through both strengthening collegiality and improving curriculum show that both are intertwined. While working on the collegial process, one principal revised faculty hiring practices to involve six rotating staff members responsible for all interviewing and hiring. Another principal introduced shared decision-making. The third principal appointed teacher teams to deal with key issues. Working on curricular content involved specifying goals in greater detail and promoting staff development. Each of the principals interviewed is working on assessment plans as a way of sharpening attention to new outcomes for students. The optimum solution to the dilemma would support collegial, empowering processes aimed toward specific instructional goals. (MLF)

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Brief

to principals

Collegial Process versus Curricular Focus: Dilemma for Principal Leadership?

by Karen Prager

For innovative principals, restructuring means working with staff to create new visions of education and goals for student learning. Through research at the Center, we hear principals discuss a persisting dilemma of school leadership: Do you concentrate your efforts on building cohesion and good working relationships among staff or on specific curriculum aimed toward specific learning outcomes for students?

Some school principals state explicitly that their most important task in restructuring is to build a collaborative process within the staff. A principal says she wants to move away from the conventional pattern of teachers as isolated entities following an authoritarian leader. By putting energy into providing group experiences, perhaps in governance committees, she helps enhance listening and communication skills which, she hopes, will lead toward building school consensus around curriculum. She contends there is no reason to talk about curriculum goals until the school develops a collegial working group. That's one side of the coin.

On the flip side is a principal who sees no point in expending effort on enabling processes and establishing faculty trust unless the faculty commit to some basic curriculum goals that represent meaningful outcomes for students. This instructional leader says that unless the school is committed to making sure all children learn something substantial, including the lowest achieving child, there is not much logic in improving staff relations. He asserts that deciding what skills and knowledge children should learn is his first task. Faculty collegiality is hollow in a school unless connected to suitable curriculum goals for students.

In practice this split represents a false dichotomy. It would be folly to choose either process or vision as an exclusive strategy, and restructuring schools operate somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes. "I don't think you can do one without the other," says Audubon Elementary School (Baton Rouge) principal Phyllis Crawford in her Louisiana drawl. "They are both intertwined."

To understand the process of weaving these two emphases together, it is useful to define and consider each side of this strategic dilemma. We interviewed three principals who worked through both strengthening collegiality and improving curriculum.

WORKING ON COLLEGIAL PROCESS

Most principals in schools being studied by the Center assert that they started with faculty process—trying to create mechanisms for collegiality. Indeed, there is an explicit need to build a collaborative climate in which staff listen, com-

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Staff are more involved, they know what the goals are because they wrote and developed goals, and they have to share them with the staff on other committees. They do a much better job of implementing it. They are their goals!

Mac McVey,
Franklin principal

municate, work productively together, share an ethos, make and agree on decisions which affect the school.

Audubon's principal sought to build a professional community by revising faculty hiring practices. It is "the first major change" she implemented in her school of 650 students with a 35%-65% minority-majority mix. Originally Crawford hired staff without input from others. Now she is one of six rotating staff members responsible for all interviewing and hiring. She has just one vote on the hiring committee. Criteria for collegial interaction guide hiring decisions:

We really look for individuals who embrace change, would help each other, and would not mind being observed. We look for work ethic, creativity, and commitment. All of those things before we start into pedagogy. It's brought on an instant bonding, as if you were responsible for hiring me, you are going to make sure that in every way possible I don't fail.

Crawford says the new hiring process has enhanced staff cohesiveness and morale. By promoting observations of their colleagues' teaching—"every teacher at Audubon makes one observation a month"—the faculty have a clear idea of what goes on at the school. Says Crawford, "We support them in an atmosphere which says it's okay not to know how to do something; it's okay to ask for help." With observations ingrained as staff procedure, teachers seem "less afraid to take risks. We have an extremely high trust level."

Trust is a theme echoed by principal Chuck Bowen, who came to Pekin, Illinois five years ago as a facilitator for the Coalition of Essential Schools. His first foray into building collegial process came as the staff of Broadmoor Junior High School considered whether to join the Coalition.

We set a standard early on in terms of process, about how decisions had to be made. The initial thrust of the process was that it had to be some form of shared decision-making. . . . Over time, we learned how to work through conflicts, how to disagree and not take it personally. We began to develop parameters for how we decide who

makes decisions. Through that you build trust.

Today dialogue permeates all decision-making at Broadmoor. Teachers are empowered to resolve issues together and take that commitment seriously. Bowen explains:

[First] you make it clear that a particular group has the obligation to make a decision and if you don't participate in the group, you still have to live with the decision. . . . You do get everyone to understand that everybody has a right to their voice in the decision and everybody needs to be satisfied with the decision in order to allow the whole school to move forward.

Unstated assumptions of school restructuring imply that student learning will improve by following certain procedures, like shared decision-making, site-based management, or interdisciplinary teaming (Deal & Peterson, 1990). But the link between these processes and student learning has yet to be demonstrated.

Educators may agree that student learning is the very point of restructuring, but questioning how each innovation will actually promote learning takes persistent effort. As Elmore (1990) argues, "sustaining a focus on academic learning in restructured schools depends heavily on the creation of settings and modes of discourse in which experts, professionals, and clients debate and construct the meaning of academic learning" (p. 24).

Teachers' involvement in the collaborative process is also evident at Franklin Elementary School (Madison, Wisconsin) where every teacher must serve on a committee. Principal Durward "Mac" McVey faced a diverse student population when he was transferred to Franklin after a special program of racial integration began. McVey appointed teams to deal with key issues: student achievement, discipline, budget, school

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climate among others. The committees write their own goals which become the "School Improvement Plan." Each team is co-chaired, chairs can rotate, and committee chairs become the "leadership committee" which plans in-services and staff meetings, and makes all major curricular recommendations for the school as a whole.

McVey says the process led to better implementation of school goals.

Staff are more involved, they know what the goals are because they wrote and developed goals, and they have to share them with the staff on other committees. They do a much better job of implementing it. They are their goals! It makes life much easier for the principal, and you get better goals, and better results because it's the result of a lot of brain power versus a single entity sitting in an office.

But having clear goals does not mean that students will gain powerful knowledge and important skills.

WORKING ON CURRICULAR CONTENT

One critical issue of educational reform is what students should know and be able to do. The principal who tries to "restructure" by establishing goals for student outcomes may start with a school mission statement and curricular content goals. These may include higher order thinking skills and depth of understanding in specific subjects. How does the school leader insure that a mission statement will actually affect teacher and student behavior in the school?

A first step toward that end would be to specify goals in greater detail. Too often learning goals are delineated in committee through further abstract language, while the onus to put the plans into practice is left to

individual staff. In an interview, Associate Director Gary Wehlage said, "It's an interesting problem to see restructuring as both an intellectual process and a governance and professionalization process. There probably isn't enough attention to the intellectual process because that requires people to change their teaching behaviors in ways that are much more difficult than participating in a governance process. Shared decision-making is relatively easy."

Awarded Teacher of the Year in the very school she was to lead, Crawford thought of herself as Audubon's instructional leader. She had experience conducting staff workshops around the country, specialized in whole language and experiential learning, and integrating arts into the curriculum. Thus, she promoted staff development as a major thrust of curricular change from the start.

We have to have a knowledge-base before we can move forward, whether it is articles we read, current research, or workshops we attend. We need a knowledge-base to know whether we want to pursue a particular change. . . And I have to grow with them, to be perceived as interested in what they learn and interested in supporting what they need to know.

For example, Audubon staff studied a reading program for at-risk students for a year before adopting it and committing staff resources and time. Indeed staff raised \$10,000 to help fund training of a specialist in reading for at-risk students for the county. Then the entire staff trained and lead workshops for Louisiana and surrounding states in what Crawford describes as "curricular changes which made a difference in our students' outcomes": whole language, hands-on science and math, critical thinking, technology, visual and performing

arts. Through grant writing, fundraising, and a training workshop, staff and community were able to provide \$100,000 worth of computer equipment to the school over 2½ years.

Mac McVey affected curriculum by bringing a whole language specialist to Franklin in 1984. Advocating whole language as the only way to bridge cultural and learning differences of students, and despite vocal staff objections, McVey declared basal readers would be obsolete by 1987. It was the only significant decision he made unilaterally. Through committee meetings, staff targeted a series of school goals:

- 1 Whole language by 1987;
- 2 Multi-cultural programming by 1990;
- 3 Hands-on math and science curriculum by 1993.

As a school goal for 1993-94, the leadership committee decided to convert the entire school to multi-age groupings.

As shown in the authentic assessment movement, desirable learning "outcomes" shift as traditional standardized tests make room for alternative methods of assessment. This challenges principals and staff to evolve conceptions of student learning. Each of the principals interviewed is working on assessment plans as a way of sharpening attention to new outcomes for students.

Along with portfolios, Franklin staff created a twelve-point continuum of developmentally appropriate skills for use in reading and writing assessment, and are forming one for math. At Audubon, portfolios are integrated in primary grades, and new evaluations of literature rather than skills are in place in the upper grades. Crawford negotiated with the superintendent to eliminate district mandated California Achievement Tests in K, 1, 2, 3, and 5. At Broadmoor, math assessment evolved from testing "sub-skills" to

creating 10 realistic goals shared by 7th and 8th graders by the time they leave the school.

Effective curricular goals identify what students know, what they need to know, and what they need to do to demonstrate true knowledge. Three common traps in setting curricular goals have become apparent through Center research, says Director Fred Newmann: 1) Adopting goals that are too broad. Such goals fail to provide enough instructional focus; they allow staff to function as they would anyway. 2) Adopting too many diverse goals. In this case each staff member can fulfill separate parts, with no assurance that the school embraces the entire package. 3) Adopting overly ambitious goals that cannot be implemented with limited resources for staff development and materials. These goals fail staff when administrators don't provide the support needed to achieve them.

Bowen views changes in practice through the lens of "progressive approximation":

You make an attempt in the direction you want to go,

evaluate it and see how close you were to the mark, and decide what you are going to do next time. Then you come up with another approximation that's a little bit closer. Over time, not only does what you are doing change, but your target changes, because you understand more about what you are trying to do. You can never get there, but you can come progressively closer to approaches that meet the needs of kids and schools at the same time. And that's worth doing.

In summary, the optimal solution would support collegial, empowering processes aimed toward specific instructional goals. No matter how democratic and inclusive the faculty process, it will not necessarily serve students well, nor improve faculty expertise, unless it is inspired by substantive visions of high quality student outcomes and professional practice. Conversely, no matter how well articulated the vision or standards of excellence for students and teachers,

they are not likely to be implemented well unless faculty experience some sense of ownership over the process of defining and attaining the vision.

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Collegial Process versus Curricular Focus

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The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools will study how organizational features of schools can be changed to increase the intellectual and social competence of students. The five-year program of research focuses on restructuring in four areas: the experiences of students in school; the professional life of teachers; the governance, management and leadership of schools; and the coordination of community resources to better serve educationally disadvantaged students.

Through syntheses of previous research, analyses of existing data, and new empirical studies of education reform, the Center will focus on six critical issues for elementary, middle and high schools: How can schooling nurture authentic forms of student achievement? How can schooling enhance educational equity? How can decentralization and local empowerment be constructively developed? How can schools be transformed into communities of learning? How can change be approached through thoughtful dialogue and support rather than coercion and regulation? How can the focus on student outcomes be shaped to serve these five principles?

CENTER PUBLICATIONS

In the fall and spring of each year, the Center publishes an issue report which offers in-depth analysis of critical issues in school restructuring, distributed free to all persons on the mailing list. In addition, three "briefs" targeted to special audiences will be offered yearly. Our 1992 bibliography, currently available, will be updated each year and is distributed free on request. Occasional papers reporting results of Center research will be available at cost. To be placed on the mailing list and receive *Issues in Restructuring Schools*, please contact Karen Prager, Dissemination Coordinator, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, University of Wisconsin, 1025 W. Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706. Telephone: (608) 263-7575.

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